
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	3146 16th Street, NW	() Consent
Meeting Date:	June 30, 2011	(x) New construction
Case Number:	11-345	(x) Addition
		(x) Alterations
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennée	(x) Concept

The applicant, contract purchaser Bozzuto Homes, Inc., with Martinez and Johnson Architecture, requests the Board's conceptual review of a proposal to convert a church to residential use, to demolish the rear of the building, to make several exterior alterations, and to add taller side and rear additions.

In recent years the home of the Meridian Hill Baptist Church, this classical limestone edifice was erected in 1927-1928 as the Mount Pleasant Methodist Episcopal Church to a design by the prominent firm of Porter & Lockie. But the present main block was built across the face of the congregation's earlier, brick church, constructed more than eleven years prior. The façade of this 1916 church was destroyed in the expansion, and the older building became the apse of the sanctuary as well as accommodating "back of house" functions within inserted floors.

Demolition

The proposal includes the demolition of the 1916 brick church, leaving the limestone main block. While comprising the older portion of the building, its demolition is consistent with the purposes of the preservation law, because its character and integrity were largely lost with the addition of the "new" church and the destruction of the original façade and the insertion of floors in 1927 *and* after the considerable structural damage caused by the spread of fire from the Deauville Apartments in 2008.

New construction

An addition is proposed to wrap around the south side and rear of the church, taking the place of a parking area and the demolished rear wing. Some parking would be accommodated into a basement and first-floor space using an elevator.

The L-shaped addition would be expressed as *two* additions, a side and a rear, by the use of different treatments of the elevations and by the creation of a "notch" at their juncture. This would relieve somewhat the feeling of the church being encircled by the new construction and create the illusion of one addition separate from and forward of the other. Although the materials are not specified, the rear bar appears to be of masonry, and there are alternative fenestration schemes offered. The side addition would have more glazing and some kind of

panelized skin. The rear elevation (page 29) is fairly schematic, but with the exception of banks of quadruple-ganged windows, is not so different from what one might see on a secondary elevation of an older apartment.

The side addition is sufficiently compatible as a sliver building comparable in height to the apartment building to the south or even mediating between the height of that structure and that of the church. The church is a robust piece of architecture that can stand its own against some additions.

The principal issue posed by the additions is the degree to which the rear one may loom over the church. After all, it would stand immediately behind the church's main block. The views to the church from 16th Street are very broad and available. Ideally, no rear addition would be visible from the street, as is the case with most buildings historically and the most compatible approach to adding today. And certainly preferable to what is proposed would be an addition that, in perspective, at least appears lower than the church's roof ridge. But any visibly taller addition must be recessive—in fact, it must be a background building in all respects, resembling more the rear or side of an incidentally adjacent building. Of the two fenestration approaches to the rear addition presented (page 31), the first option, with the more vertical windows, is probably preferable, although openings consistent with traditional window proportions would certainly be compatible. The effort to vary the roofline somewhat is probably useful, in contrast to the second option, whose regimentation is reminiscent of a Modernist office building.

It is imperative that the perspectives shown are accurate in the sense that mechanical equipment and stair and elevator penthouses do not appear over the roof parapets, increasing the height and busy-ness of the construction surrounding the church.

Alterations

The church would be altered in several ways to adapt it to residential use. There would possibly have to be alterations to the exterior in order to improve access to the sanctuary level.

The section on page 27, elevation on page 29, and ground-level plan on page 22 indicate that the grade would be raised next to the basement window openings on both sides, necessitating window wells.

In addition to the insertion of floors into the sanctuary, unfortunately, the stained-glass windows would be replaced with clear-glass, presumably operable ones. This is probably an unavoidable consequence of the adaptation to this new use.

There are two plainly incompatible alterations proposed. One is the insertion of window openings into the side elevations, between the upper and lower (main floor and loft) windows in the sanctuary. This requires removal of portions of the limestone walls, replacing the decorative, recessed panels and creating an effect of a column of glass substantially different from the widely spaced openings clearly punched into the solid masonry. This is a major intervention into the historic building, one that significantly affects its character. While the rear, brick portion of the church may no longer be considered character-defining, the entirety of the main, limestone block certainly is. In the hierarchy of materials, dressed stone has been the highest in terms of

cost, desirability and necessary craftsmanship. The historic preservation design guidelines¹ state that:

Adding new details or ornamentation to an existing primary wall or above ground foundation wall is almost never appropriate. Their addition will change the character of a wall, giving a false sense of its historic appearance....

Existing details and ornamentation that contribute to the character of walls and above ground foundations should not be altered....

Creating a new opening or enlarging an existing opening in a primary character-defining wall for a window, door, through- wall air conditioning unit or other reason is almost never appropriate. If a new opening must be created, for example to make a building functional, it should be located on a rear, non-character-defining wall. The size, design and detailing of the new opening should be compatible with the character of the wall.

Changing the location, covering-up or changing the dimensions of a window opening is almost never appropriate since it alters the character of the existing window....

Altering the existing window pattern, either by changing their location or adding new windows to a façade, is strongly discouraged or should only be done after carefully considering the effect of the change on the overall character of a building...

The other incompatible alteration is the carving out of terraces from the side slopes of the church roof in a manner as to be visible from the street. If such alterations can be shifted rearward and lowered behind the stone parapet so as not to be visible, they might be sufficiently compatible.

Recommendation

As it is, the project proposes to demolish half of the historic building, to wrap it closely in taller additions, to remove the historic stained-glass windows and to completely alter the interior. The staff has supported all of the height requested and even recommended a larger side addition for several reasons. But the project offers relatively little preservation, let alone restoration, other than removing the modern signage and handicap ramp. In addition to the major alterations requested, the applicant wishes to expand some existing openings and create new ones in the remaining main block. This is asking too much of the historic building and too greatly affects the character of a very fine and prominent edifice that would certainly be eligible for landmark designation for its architecture alone.

With respect to properties in historic districts, the express purposes of the preservation law are:

(A) To retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the historic district and to encourage their adaptation for current use;

¹ The sections of the guidelines from which these quotes are taken relate to “walls and foundations” and “windows and doors.”

- (B) To assure that alterations of existing structures are compatible with the character of the historic district; and
- (C) To assure that new construction and subdivision of lots in an historic district are compatible with the character of the historic district;

The adaptability interest is given a great deal of weight in the proposal. Even if not making such interventions results in inserting fewer floors into the sanctuary, the preservation interest—to retain and enhance—must remain paramount with regard to direct physical impacts on the church.

The staff recommends that the Board approve the demolition of the rear of the building and the general design approach to the additions in concept, with the conditions that the mechanical equipment and penthouses must be located and concealed as suggested by the present drawings and that the design continue to be revised and refined. It is further recommended that the Board not approve in concept the terrace alterations to the church roof or the new window openings in the church walls.